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ECSTASY OF THE SOCIAL: THE MASSES. MORE SOCIAL THAN THE SOCIAL.

NECROPOLITICS BARBARISM, BAUDRILLARD, BIOPOLITIK POSTMODERNER KÖRPER, CAPITALISM, EXPLOSION OF THE SOCIAL, SIMULATION

What is there beyond the end? Beyond the end extends virtual reality, the horizon of a programmed reality in which all our functions—memory, emotions, sexuality, intelligence— become progressively useless. Beyond the end, in the era of the trans-political, the transsexual, the trans-aesthetic, all our desiring machines become little spectacle machines, then quite simply bachelor machines, before trailing off into the countdown of the species. The countdown is the code of the automatic disappearance of the world, and all our little charitable machines, by way of which we anticipate that disappearance—the Telethons, Sidathons, and all kinds of Thanathons—are merely the promotional sales events for the misery of this fin de siècle.

But—and this is even more paradoxical—what are we to do when nothing really comes to an end anymore, that is to say, when nothing ever really takes place, since everything is already calculated, audited, and realized in advance (the simulacrum preceding the real, information preceding the event, etc.)? Our problem is no longer: What are we to make of real events, of real violence? Rather, it is: What are we to make of events that do not take place? Not: What are we to do after the orgy? But: What are we to do when the orgy no longer takes place—the orgy of history, the orgy of revolution and liberation, the orgy of modernity? Little by little, as the hands of the clock move around (though, sadly, digitalclocks no longer even have hands), we tell ourselves that, taking everything into account—taking everything into a “countdown”—modernity has never happened. There has never really been any modernity, never any real progress, never any assured liberation. The linear tension of modernity and progress has been broken, the thread of history has become tangled: the last great “historic” event—the fall of the Berlin Wall—signified something closer to an enormous repentance on the part of history. Instead of seeking fresh perspectives, history appears rather to be splintering into scattered fragments, and phases of events and conflicts we had thought long gone are being reactivated.

All that we believed over and done, left behind by the inexorable march of universal progress, is not dead at all; it seems to be returning to strike at the heart of our ultrasophisticated, ultravulnerable systems. It's a bit like the last scene of Jurassic Park, in which the modern (artificially cloned) dinosaurs burst into the museum and wreak havoc on their fossilized ancestors preserved there, before being destroyed in their turn. Today we are caught as a species in a similar impasse, trapped between our fossils and our clones.

So, the countdown extends in both directions: not only does it put an end to time in the future but it also exhausts itself in the obsessional revival of the events of the past. A reversed recapitulation, which is the opposite of a living memory—it is fanatical *memorization*, a fascination with commemorations, rehabilitations, cultural museification, the listing of sites of memory, the extolling of heritage. In fact this obsession with reliving and reviving everything, this obsessional neurosis, this forcing of memory is equivalent to a vanishing of memory—a vanishing of actual history, a vanishing of the event in the information space. This amounts to making the past itself into a clone, an artificial double, and freezing it in a sham exactitude that will never actually do it justice. But it is because we have nothing else, now, but objects in which not to believe, nothing but fossilized hopes, that we are forced to go down this road: to elevate everything to the status of a museum piece, an item of heritage. Here again, time reverses: instead of things first passing through history before becoming part of the heritage, they now pass directly into the heritage. Instead of first existing, works of art now go straight into the museum. Instead of being born and dying, beings are “born” as virtual fossils. Collective neurosis. As a result, the ozone layer that was protecting memory becomes frayed; the hole through which memories and time are leaking out into space expands, prefiguring the great migration of the void to the periphery.

Closing down, closing down! It's the end-of-the-century sale. Everything must go! Modernity is over (without ever having happened), the orgy is over, the party is over—the sales are starting. It's the great end-of-the-century sale. But the sales don't come after the festive seasons any longer; nowadays the sales start first, they last the whole year long, even the festivals themselves are on sale everywhere... The stocks have to be used up, time-capital has to be used up, life-capital has to be used up. Everywhere, we have the countdown; what we are living through in this symbolic end of the old millennium is a sort of fatal prescription, whether it be that of the planet's resources or of AIDS, which has become the collective symptom of the prescribed term of death. It is all these things that hang over us in the shadow of the Year 2000, together with the delicious, yet terrifying enjoyment of the lag time left to us. But, ultimately, perhaps the Year 2000 will not have taken place? Perhaps, on the occasion of the Year 2000, we are to be granted a general amnesty?

The concept of countdown evokes once again Arthur C. Clarke's “The Nine Billion Names of God.” A community of Tibetan monks has been engaged from time immemorial in listing and copying out the names of God, of which there are nine billion. At the end of this, the world will end. So runs the prophecy. But the monks are tired and, in order to hasten the work, they call in the experts at IBM, who come along with their computers and finish the job in a month. It is as if the operation of the virtual dimension were to bring the history of the world to an end in an instant. Unfortunately, this also means the disappearance of the world in real time, for the prophecy of the end of the world associated with this countdown of the names of God is fulfilled. As they go back down into the valley, the technicians, who did not actually believe the prophecy, see the stars vanishing from the firmament, one by one.

This parable depicts our modern situation well: we have called in the IBM technicians and they have launched the code of the world's automatic disappearance. As a result of the intervention of all the digital, computing, and virtual reality technologies, we are already beyond reality; things have already passed beyond their own ends. They cannot, therefore, come to an end any longer, and they sink into the interminable (interminable history, interminable politics, interminable crisis).

And, in effect, we persevere, on the pretext of an increasingly sophisticated technology, in the endless deconstruction of a world and of a history unable to transcend and complete itself. Everything is free to go on infinitely. We no longer have the means to end processes. They unfold without us now, beyond reality, so to speak, in an endless speculation, an exponential acceleration. But, as a result, they do so in an indifference that is also exponential. What is endless is also desire-less, tension-less, passionless; it is bereft of events. An anorectic history, no longer fueled by real incidents and exhausting itself in the countdown. Exactly the opposite of the end of history, then: *the impossibility of finishing with history*. If history can no longer reach its end, then it is, properly speaking, no longer a history. We have lost history and have also, as a result, lost the end of history. We are laboring under the illusion of the end, under the posthumous illusion of the end. And this is serious, for the end signifies that something has really taken place. Whereas we, at the height of reality—and with information at its peak—no longer know whether anything has taken place or not.

Perhaps the end of history, if we can actually conceive such a thing, is merely ironic? Perhaps it is merely an effect of the ruse of history, which consists in its having concealed the end from us, in its having ended without our noticing it. So that it is merely the end of history that is being fueled, whereas we believe we are continuing to make it. We are still awaiting its end, whereas that end has, in fact, already taken place. History's ruse was to make us believe in its end, when it has, in fact, already started back in the opposite direction.

Whether we speak of the end of history, the end of the political or the end of the social, what we are clearly dealing with is the end of *the scene of the political*, the end of *the scene of the social*, the end of *the scene of history*. In other words, in all these spheres, we are speaking of the advent of a specific era of *obscenity*. Obscenity may be characterized as the endless, unbridled proliferation of the social, of the political, of information, of the economic, of the aesthetic, not to mention the sexual. Obesity is another of the figures of obscenity. As proliferation, as the saturation of a limitless space, obesity may stand as a general metaphor for our systems of information, communication, production, and memory. Obesity and obscenity form the contrapuntal figure for all our systems, which have been seized by something of an Ubuesque distension. All our structures end up swelling like red giants that absorb everything in their expansion. Thus the social sphere, as it expands, absorbs the political sphere entirely. But the political sphere is itself obese and obscene—and yet at the same time it is becoming increasingly transparent. The more it distends, the more it virtually ceases to exist. When everything is political, that is the end of politics as destiny; it is the beginning of politics as culture and the immediate poverty of that cultural politics. It is the same with the economic or the sexual spheres. As it dilates, each structure infiltrates and subsumes the others, before being absorbed in its turn.

Such are the extreme phenomena: those that occur beyond the end (extreme = *ex terminis*). They indicate that we have passed

from growth (*croissance*) to outgrowth (*ex-croissance*), from movement and change to stasis, *ek-stasis*, and metastasis. They countersign the end, marking it by excess, hypertrophy, proliferation, and chain reaction; they reach critical mass, overstep the critical deadline, through potentiality and exponentiality.

Ecstasy of the social: *the masses. More social than the social.*

Ecstasy of the body: *obesity. Fatter than fat.*

Ecstasy of information: *simulation. Truer than true.*

Ecstasy of time: *real time, instantaneity. More present than the present.*

Ecstasy of the real: *the hyperreal. More real than the real.*

Ecstasy of sex: *porn. More sexual than sex.*

Ecstasy of violence: *terror. More violent than violence...*

All this describes, by a kind of potentiation, arising to the second power, a pushing to the limit, a state of unconditional realization, of total positivity (every negative sign raised to the second power produces a positive), from which all utopia, all death, and all negativity have been expunged. A state of ex-termination, cleansing of the negative, as corollary to all the other actual forms of purification and discrimination. Thus, freedom has been obliterated, liquidated by liberation; truth has been supplanted by verification; the community has been liquidated and absorbed by communication; form gives way to information and performance. Everywhere we see a paradoxical logic: the idea is destroyed by its own realization, by its own excess. And in this way history itself comes to an end, finds itself obliterated by the instantaneity and omnipresence of the event.

This kind of *acceleration by inertia*, this exponentiality of extreme phenomena, produces a new kind of event: now we encounter strange, altered, random, and chaotic events that Historical Reason no longer recognizes as its own. Even if, by analogy with past events, we think we recognize them, they no longer have the same meaning. The same incidents (wars, ethnic conflicts, nationalisms, the unification of Europe) do not have the same meaning when they arise as part of a history in progress as they do in the context of a history in decline. Now, we find ourselves in a vanishing history, and that is why they appear as ghost events to us.

But is a ghost history, a spectral history, still a history?

Not only have we lost utopia as an ideal end, but historical time itself is also lost, in its continuity and its unfolding. Something like a short-circuit has occurred, a switch shift of the temporal dimension—effects preceding causes, ends preceding origins—and these have led to the paradox of achieved utopia. Now, achieved utopia puts paid to the utopian dimension. It creates an impossible situation, in the sense that it exhausts the possibilities. From this point on, the goal is no longer life transformed, which was the maximal utopia, but rather life-as-survival, which is a kind of minimal utopia.

So today, with the loss of utopias and ideologies, we lack objects of belief. But even worse, perhaps, we lack *objects in which not to believe*. For it is vital—maybe even more vital—to have things in which not to believe. Ironic objects, so to speak, dis-invested practices, ideas to believe or disbelieve as you like. Ideologies performed this ambiguous function pretty well. All this is now jeopardized, vanishing progressively into extreme reality and extreme operability.

Other things are emerging: retrospective utopias, the revival of all earlier or archaic forms of what is, in a sense, a retrospective or necrospective history. For the disappearance of avant-gardes, those emblems of modernity, has not brought the disappearance of the rearguard as well. Just the opposite is true. In this process of general retroversion (was history perhaps infected with a retrovirus?), the rearguard finds itself in point position.

Quite familiar by now is the parodic, palindomic event, the event Marx analyzed when he depicted Napoleon III as a grotesque copy of Napoleon I. In this second event—a cheap avatar of the original—we have a form of dilution, of historical entropy: history self-repeating becomes farce. The fake history presents itself as if it were advancing and continuing, when it is actually collapsing. The current period offers numerous examples of this debased, extenuated form of the primary events of modernity. Ghostevents, clone-events, *faux*-events, phantom-events—such as phantom limbs, those missing legs or arms that hurt even when they are no longer there. Spectrality, of communism in particular.

Events that are more or less ephemeral because they no longer have any resolution except in the media (where they have the “resolution” images do, where they are “resolved” in high definition)—they have no political resolution. We have a history that no longer consists of action, of acts, but instead culminates in a virtual acting-out; it retains a spectral air of déjà-vu. Sarajevo is a fine example of this unreal history, in which all the participants were just standing by, unable to act. It is no longer an event, but rather the symbol of a specific impotence of history. Everywhere, virtuality—the media hyperspace and the hyperspace of discourses—develops in a way diametrically opposed to what one might call, if it still existed, the real movement of history.

excerpt from the book: ***The Vital Illusion***, Jean Baudrillard

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